SIERRA COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS'
AGENDA TRANSMITTAL & RECORD OF PROCEEDINGS

MEETING DATE: 08/01/2023

DEPARTMENT: Board of Supervisors

PHONE NUMBER: 530-289-3506

REQUESTED BY: Lee Adams, District One

TYPE OF AGENDA ITEM:

☑ REGULAR ☐ CONSENT ☐ TIMED

SUPPORTIVE DOCUMENT ATTACHED: Letter and Photo

☐ RESOLUTION ☑ MEMO

☐ AGREEMENT OTHER _____

AGENDA ITEM:

Acceptance of donation of oil painting by Eleanor Scott Nevins of the 1854 Sierra County Courthouse. Donation made by the family of her daughter, Mary Flanagan-Hanson.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

See attached memo.

FUNDING SOURCE:
GENERAL FUND IMPACT: NO ADDITIONAL

OTHER FUND:
AMOUNT: $ N/A

ARE ADDITIONAL PERSONNEL REQUIRED?

☐ YES ☑ NO

TYPE OF EMPLOYEE NONE

IS THIS ITEM ALLOCATED IN THE BUDGET?

☐ YES ☑ NO

IS A BUDGET TRANSFER REQUIRED?

☐ YES ☑ NO

SPACE BELOW FOR CLERK'S USE

BOARD ACTION:

☐ APPROVED ☐ APPROVED AS AMENDED

☐ ADOPTED ☐ ADOPTED AS AMENDED

☐ DENIED ☐ OTHER

☐ NO ACTION TAKEN

SET PUBLIC HEARING FOR:

_____

DIRECTION TO: _____

REFERRED TO: _____

CONTINUED TO: _____

AUTHORIZATION GIVEN TO:_____

BOARD VOTE: ☐ BY CONSENSUS

AYES:

ABSTAIN:

NOES:

ABSENT:

RESOLUTION 2023-_____

AGREEMENT 2023-_____

ORDINANCE _____

COMMENTS:

_____ _____

CLERK OF THE BOARD DATE

MEMO:

Subject: Acceptance of donation of oil painting by Eleanor Scott Nevins of the 1854 Sierra County Courthouse. Donation made by the family of her daughter, Mary Flanagan-Hanson.

Department: Board of Supervisors – Lee Adams, Supervisor District 1

Background: The Nevins family lived in both Sierra City and Downieville in the 1930s and while here, Eleanor Scott Nevins painted this work in oil of the 1854 Sierra County Courthouse, a structure still standing while they resided here. Their daughter, Mary Flanagan-Hanson, recently passed and it was her desire that this artwork return to Downieville. The children of Mrs. Flanagan-Hanson where in Downieville recently and brought this painting with the wish that it be presented to Sierra County with the hope it be displayed in the existing Sierra County Courthouse. Attached is a document written by Mrs. Flanagan-Hanson recalling her childhood years in Sierra County.

How We Went to the Mountains

SIERRA CITY

In 1936, Daddy got a teaching job, a good one for which he was well-suited. In order to teach in California, one is required to have a teaching credential which certifies that the applicant has studied and passed the required courses for the level and subjects that he is to teach. Daddy had not completed college <his Stanford education had been interrupted by the Depression after 1.5 years of attendance>, nor had he studied for a teaching credential; however, at that time a credential to teach music was being granted to those who were gifted in music and who passed a special test. Luckily, this worked out for Daddy.

Daddy took his first teaching job in the Sierra High School District, where he taught band, orchestra, and singing. His morning classes took place in Sierra City. Downieville—thirteen miles distant on Highway 49—was the location for the afternoon classes. He developed a marching band in each school which played for parades and on other occasions. His singing classes were much in demand for entertainment in the small communities.

The Sierra City High School and Grammar School were located in one large building. I do not recall anything about the high school classrooms, but I do remember the grammar school room very well. It was one room for all eight grades, with a big pot-bellied stove in the middle, which heated the whole room through the fierce winters. The lower four grades were on one side of the room, and the upper four were on the other. Three girls, myself included, were in first the first grade. There was no second grade. In the third grade were the two children of a widowed miner: a boy and his older sister Wanda, who was blind, with several fingers missing. As a small child she had played with some blasting caps, which exploded in her hands and face. The fourth grade contained about five children. The upper grades were a bit larger than the lower. Discipline for serious infractions in class involved having to hold out one's hand to get it whacked several times with a ruler. I never did.

In the middle of that schoolroom was a huge pot-bellied stove in which a wood fire was kept burning through the winter to warm that very large space. The upper four grades were on the other side of the stove.

The teacher of these eight grades was Miss Moore, and it was said that she taught us well. Here I first learned to read, and at the age of six in 1936, was I ready! I recall trying to read everything. Sounding out the syllables; the newspaper suddenly had words for me. Every book I could grab became an adventure. I walked around spelling words to myself. I raced ahead, until by the end of the year I had completed the curriculum for both first and second grades.

The electric power in that town was very unpredictable. Apparently, the power plant did not have a way of regulating or balancing the load of electric current to the houses. Sometimes the lights in our house would suddenly glow bright and brighter. This was the signal to run and turn them off before the bulbs exploded. Every night, when it time to turn

off the last lights in the house, my parents would each stand at the last two lights, count, “one, two, three,” and switch them off simultaneously to keep the last bulb from exploding. Often enough, the timing was off, which meant lighting the kerosene lamps and sweeping up broken light bulbs.

From our front yard, we had a clear view of the Sierra Buttes. Here my mother began to paint. She set up her easel the front yard, and using water-based tempera, painted those mountains. This gave her much pleasure. People walking by on the road would stop to chat, since the population of the town was so small that everyone knew everyone.

DOWNIEVILLE

At summer’s end (1937), we moved to Downieville, where we lived for four more years. I started school, this time in a two-room schoolhouse, with four lower grades and four upper ones. Although it was my second year of school, I was skipped into the third grade, as I had completed the second grade curriculum in Sierra City the year before.

Our house, located just across the road from the county courthouse, had been the home of Judge Neville, who had recently died. Upon his demise, the judge, a bachelor, had willed the house to his secretary, Ruth Taylor, who became our landlady. An attractive two-story house, white with yellow trim and large windows, it stood at the end of the bridge, but considerably distanced from it on a high lot raised above the river. The road in front of our house was very steep; it was where the mountain began. Of the two front doors on the porch, one on the left opened into an office, where Mrs. Taylor still worked for the court.

The right-hand front door admitted into our quarters where all the rooms were arranged one after another; there was no hallway, so that you had to walk through each room to get to the next. First was the living room, then came the dining room, next the laundry with washtubs, and the bathroom to the left; last came the kitchen

In this kitchen also Mother set up her easel and continued her painting. The kitchen became her studio. Not only did she paint in oils, she did etchings and silk screening. She made Christmas cards and posters for Daddy’s operettas. She painted a magnificent large portrait of my brother Scotty at the age of four. She could take a pencil, move it around on paper, move it some more, and there would be revealed a person, an object, a scene beautifully rendered

School in Downieville

Those years in the Sierras were the time of my true and innocent childhood, when I was ages six to eleven. In these years we lived in one place. They were a time when I played freely and happily outdoors—our surroundings for the most part were safe.

My father, too, enjoyed his work. He found that he liked teaching, was good at it; he had an outlet for his music; he was writing music and operettas for school performances and the

productions for the community. He also was interested in the people who lived in these mountains. He loved to go to the main street of town and listen to the stories that local characters told.

Flood

"I don't like the look of it," Mother said. "I can't let you go back to school this afternoon." At eight years of age, I had just finished my lunch and was ready to return to school across town, a ten-minute walk. A rainstorm had been raging all day. Rains and snowmelt were making the river rise. Giant logs, sometimes uprooted trees were tumbling along the river now. At this time, December 10, 1937, we were still living in Downieville, right where the North Fork and the South Fork of the Yuba River meet. The jumction of the two forks of the river divides the town into three sections.

Daddy finished his lunch and left quickly to return to his classroom in the old Wells Fargo building in the center of town where he was teaching music for the high school.

Our house was in the section of town at the south of the river just west of the junction. It sat about 100 feet from the river's edge on a raised terrace-like lot. From this location we always had a good view of the town, including the Wells Fargo building. A steel suspension bridge (Durgan Bridge) for autos and foot traffic crossed the river just at the point where the road passed the front of our house to begin a steep climb up the mountain. At the back of our house, out the kitchen window,, one could see another bridge very nearby, a new, white one just recently built by the State of California. It was low and formed of three arches as it reached across the river. This bridge held my attention now.

The roar of the river was becoming louder. Logs and debris bounced through the river flow; the water kept rising. The storm was furious with rain and wind. Mother went outside in front of the house to join the people gathering in the road to watch the rising water. Apprehensive, I remained staring out the kitchen window, fixed on the river and the low white bridge. Then it happened. A sudden, enormous logjam erupted against that bridge. With tremendous speed a scrambbled pile of huge logs was thrown up and over the bridge, forming a solid dam. A pause of seconds, stillness, then a roar. Brown muddy water spilled over the logs and the river was everywhere violently, madly. It was approaching our house.

I was was crying. People were running, some screaming, Mother shouted, "Run up the mountain. Go to the Turners' house. I have to get the others. Run!" I ran, bounding and leaping up the road with superhuman strength born from my panic. The wind was a demon tearing at me.

Reaching the Turners' house, I looked down and saw the bridge by our house lifted up by the roiling water. It split apart in the middle, exploded into pieces and was carried away as if it were a toy. Electric cables flew from their poles and became wild blue snakes everywhere, whipping and flying as they spit fire into the air.

Someone took me by the hand and led me upstairs. “There are babies here on the bed. Watch them,” I was told. Now, from the upstairs window I could see everything. People were running everywhere.

I saw a house floating by, its back door swinging. There came another house, another. I saw the building where my father taught. A huge piece had been grabbed out of it. I saw Mother carrying my little sister’s crib up the road.

In an enormous flash flood, the river reached its peak within about 30 minutes, destroying everything it touched. Afterward, the water remained at a high level. The three bridges were gone. Our section of town was isolated. There was no way to reach us because not only were we cut off by the water, but the mountain behind us was rugged terrain. Incredibly, there was no loss or life. Since the town is in a narrow canyon, everyone quickly got to higher ground. Before dark that day, Mother spied Daddy standing alone on Highway 49 out of town across the river, waving his arms. He and his students had escaped from the Wells Fargo building just minutes before its brick river wall was swept away.

Many people were without shelter. From my perspective as a child, I do not know how shelter was allocated. Mother, Scotty, and my baby sister Charlotte Anne stayed in a tiny two-room cottage that belonged to a young woman teacher. For the time being, the whole area had no outside aid. All telephone lines were down. It would take days before any help could arrive for our section; we were isolated by the water and the mountains behind.Since food was in short supply, people met and food was allocated—milk for children only.

Fortunately, our house was spared. Its placement on the raised site kept it out of the water. Although the water level remained high and it was not considered safe, Mother went back into the house to try to remove what she could. She dumped the contents of dresser drawers into sheets, bundled them up, and carried them uphill to the count clerk’s office next to the courthouse. Other people did the same. (Later on, it was an interesting scenario when everyone went to reclaim their belongings, some of which were commingled.)

In a few days a line was shot across the river, and a “Flying Dutchman” installed. Daddy was one of the first across. The storm being over, the water receded and we were able to receive food delivered by that line. Soon, a swinging footbridge was constructed so that now we were able to cross the river. This bridge was our only means of access to the rest of the town until a new steel bridge could be constructed months later. Reached by steps, the bridge was high, as I recall, and it was only wide enough for one person to walk over it at at time. As you walked across, you held with both hands onto a cable on each side of you. In my mind today , it was indeed scary and dangerous high above the rapids of the river, especially when it swung in a storm or when it was slippery with snow and ice. But I had to cross it several times a day. We all did. I became fearless; it was an adventure.

Many people—those who lived along the sides of the river—had lost their homes. These people were unable to save anything, such was the speed and ferocity of the flood. Huge piles of debris intruded upon our roads and streets. We children took to climbing over the big tree roots, playing games. Over the next year a new bridge was built near our house, and another one on the other fork of the river. Traffic resumed on the roads. Little more than a small piece or two of the bridge that had been by our house has ever been found, so strong were the forces that demolished it. Those pieces were found 2 miles downstream from town.

Christmas After Tragedy

I take a little time here to include something I wrote years ago. Part of it is the result of some research I did. Most of it is what I remember seeing with my own eyes. I narrate this true story now from the perspective of over eighty years later in my life. It is a story that is remarkable, that rings out the message of human goodness and caring that can emerge at a time of dire misfortune. It is as vivid to me today as it was when it happened:

The time was a few days before Christmas of 1937, when I was eight years old. The place was Downieville, California, where my family and I lived in the house at the end of Durgan Bridge that today is the medical clinic for the town.

On December of that year, a raging flash flood had torn away parts of the town, leaving some families homeless, others, with great loss. Huge piles of debris and downed trees were everywhere. No bridges remained. A swinging footbridge very recently erected across the Yuba River gave people on our side of the river the only access to the main part of town. Everyone in town had been touched to some degree by the devastation. Christmas was coming to a subdued, saddened community, filled with hardship.

At not quite suppertime on this particular day, the approaching evening was beginning to dim the light over the town; it was cold out, but very little snow had yet fallen for this time of year. Our family was in the kitchen, all activities readying us for the day's end, when we heard a faraway sound, as of a horn honking. Then it was louder, more honking, and more. From our kitchen window we could see across to the opposite side of town, where Highway 49 reached in from the west. Here came a caravan of many cars, all with their lights on, all incessantly honking. We felt a thrill of curiosity. These mysterious newcomers drove down to the hall in the town center, where all community events were held, and there they stopped.

The E Clampus Vity had brought a Christmas party to Downieville! That night everyone in town went to the hall An enormous Christmas tree had been put up in the center of the hall, and under it were many packages, each with someone's name. There was Santa Claus, calling out the names on the brightly wrapped packages. Every child received two presents, a piece of clothing and a toy. Inside my packages I found a green sweater and a doll. Other presents were there, too, for the families and people who had lost the most. Such a surprise, such gifts, and such a celebration of resiliency for the comeback of a wounded place!—all brought by others in

the surrounding mountain communities who gave of themselves in the true spirit of that time of year.

The E Clampus Vitus had its beginning in the mid-nineteenth century as a spoof of the Masons and the Odd Fellows in the mining towns of the Sierra-Nevada Mountains. The Clampers were much less serious in nature than the other fraternal organizations. Their antics were the source of diversion and practical jokes that brought relief to lives that were rugged and often dangerous. It was a “men only” group with an avowed dedication to “widows and orphans” of the miners. Most meetings were held in “libation emporiums, where they reached stages of well-being, free from pain and distress.” Gold dust was usually the exchange medium.

The meetings were called together by the braying of the “hewgag,” a big horn which was sounded out in the street. Most meetings involved the initiation of new members, the only requirement being a poke of gold dust.

But sometimes the Clampers lapsed from their clowning. Often and quietly, they performed charitable acts for the needy. They might make a mortgage payment for a widow. In times of fire and flood they were among the first to rescue and rebuild. They held fundraising events for those in need. They were the only charitable organization to provide relief for families of miners who had been killed or injured during the days of intensive mining activity in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Clamper charity was always done anonymously, if possible. In spite of their hard-drinking reputation, the Clampers were a highly respected organization and good citizens. That occasion in 1937 truly was one more instance in which they carried on their long history of care for those in need.

I marvel at the fact that the Clampers who brought gifts came not from Downieville, but from the surrounding mountain towns. This era was in the depths of the Great Depression, and the people in those mountain communities were for the most part of modest means. That they put together a huge gift for the people of Downieville at such a time was something of special historical significance.

A Child’s Life in Downieville

As Downieville is the seat of Sierra County, we were onlookers at many trials and events at the courthouse., just across the road from our house. The jail was under the courthouse; it consisted of three cells, and the sheriff’s family lived in an apartment at the back of the building. The wife of Sheriff Dewey Johnson cooked the meals for the jail residents.

The County Clerk’s Office was a building that sat between us and the courthouse. Many a time the kids in the neighborhood played on its front lawn when they spilled over from our front yard. It had two cannons on the lawn in front, and the small children enjoyed “riding” on the cannons.

In the springtime of 1938, a particularly interesting trial took place: A death threat had been made to a candidate for office in an election. It was in the form of an anonymous typewritten

letter stating that the candidate should step down or he would be killed. His competitor for office was immediately suspect. The trial was set to determine if so, and a very famous trial detective had been called to testify.

Because she wanted to attend the trial, Mother kept me home from school for a few days to watch my baby sister. As a reward for me, she let me attend the trial one afternoon.

I remember the detective's testimony. He had greatly magnified on large posterboard some lines of the letter in question as well as some of the same lines that he typed on the man's typewriter, an Underwood, and compared the two. He pointed out in detail that certain irregularities in the print coincided with those on the copy he had made on the subject's Underwood. These he showed in big charts to the jury on the day when I was there. I had not gotten my glasses yet, but I strained to see. It was certain proof. The man ultimately was convicted.

It was at this time that Mother set up her easel in our front yard and made a painting of the courthouse. I have that painting today and intend to go to Downieville one more time in my life in order to give it to the museum there. The courthouse burned down in the late 1940s so that painting is now a part of history.

In the basement of the courthouse was the jail, which consisted of three cells. Sheriff Dewey Johnson, his wife, and children lived in an apartment at the back of the courthouse. In her kitchen, Mrs. Johnson cooked meals not only for the family, but also for the prisoners. Upon occasion, a prisoner, always a young man, would be allowed out to help us children with our sleds and toboggans. Or to do work around the courthouse. It was impossible for a prisoner to escape, since the river was swift and not fordable, the mountain behind us was passable only by an experienced climber with equipment, and crossing the bridge would not work because an escapee would be seen and immediately apprehended if he tried to leave town by the only road. Besides, prisoners were not allowed to cross the bridge. Behind the County Clerk''s Office was the gallows, still standing there from rougher times, during the gold rush. We kids used to climb on it.

Just past and across from the courthouse was located the building where The Mountain Messenger, the local weekly newspaper, was written and printed. By the side of the road sat the huge vat where the lead was melted down to be cast into type for printing. Since it was right out in the open, we could pass by it at any time. I liked to pick up and examine the cold, used type. Of course we stayed away when it was hot

Occasionally, prospectors came down the mountain past our house with the gold nuggets and gold dust they had discovered. I have a clear memory of two of the prospectors, identical twins, who seemed very old to me. Because they were both completely deaf, they each carried, in addition to their backpacks, an ancient hearing aid, about the size of half a flat of strawberries. Most prospectors, when they came in, would take their gold to the Red and White Store over the bridge, where it would be weighted on the scale in the back and

exchanged for money. Nuggets were commonly seen as a medium of exchange in stores. It was said that the front counter of the St. Charles Hotel in the center of town was covered in velvet; here gold was indeed accepted in payment of one's bill, especially dust.

Each year Daddy wrote an operetta. He sat at his desk every night in a low-ceilinged corner of my parents' bedroom and wrote until he had finally turned out the whole production—the story , the music, and the songs, usually about the town and the country there. Always the much-anticipated event of the year, the operetta would be staged in the springtime in the Memorial Hall in the center of town. My mother would design the stage sets and oversee costuming. She designed and silk- screened posters for the productions. [Jenna, there is one of those posters hanging on the wall in your home.] The high school students acted the roles and sang the songs; the school band played the music. One line only comes to me now: "When You Hitch Your Wagon to a Star, be sure that you are prepared for the ride…"

When I turned eleven, we came out of the mountains, and life was suddenly very different. For a long while I was homesick—for the forest, the sound of the river, and the freedom of play in a place where time had stood still for a while.